The Emerging Arts in 2000

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partial installation view of *ec-satyricOn 2000* art exhibition by Joseph Nechvatal at Universal
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Technological consciousness provides the substructure from which a new art is emerging. Specifically, this emerging art is predicated in the telematic and the immersive. The telematic/immersive is the construction of a convincing transactional singleness beyond the realm of the corporeal; a realm which suggests a world of connectiveness which spans from many to many - united rhizomatically into an expanded hyper-unity. Here the corporeal heavy weight of the body takes on a lightness of being.

The emerging arts are hyper. The strategy of hyper-anything includes principles of networked connections and electronic links which give multiple choices of passages to follow

and continually new branching possibilities. The hyper telematic/immersive suggests that the body is but the temporary hardware housing a vast and luminous software immateriality. In this realm of discourse the corporeal is a complex compendium of multiplicity and distribution which adds up to a total-art work (gesamtkunstwerk) - though an undiagramic one.

At the end of the millennium, vision and the body have made the quantum jump into a transcendental, multiple self of mediated virtual realities. The question is no longer what or who I am, but how can I be all that I can be.

The emerging arts are rhizomatically diagonal as they transpire, at least partially, in deep digital space - and in a sense secure a subterranean immersive space for us to enter if we ask them to. For example, relevant to the emerging arts is that under recent epistemological scrutiny is what Jacques Derrida has described of as logocentrism: the once held distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity. Today, with heightening telematic connectivity, these logocentric distinctions are breaking down under the pressure of telematic (and immersive) art technologies.

By identifying an individual's hyper-real presence in a vaporously technologically stored set of bits, the post-modernist existential concept of the logocentric individual has been supplanted by the fabulated electronically produced simulacrum-persona. This quality of phantasmagorical replacement has formulated a new understanding of phallocratic existence which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called schizoid. According to them, being is now inseparable from a technologically hallucinogenic/schizoid culture. With telematic connectivity this understanding of consciousness has become central to the post-industrial emerging arts and now supplies our hyper society with a rich metaphorical tool with which to understand itself.

In our hyper age - given our heightened condition of maximizing data-flow - once fixed logocentric identities based on Euclidean spatial distinctions are being continuously transposed by malleable, telematic, computational, and immersive configurations of self-awareness as the borders of the conventional logocentric object/subject relationship computationally bleed. Hence hyper telematic immersion - with its insinuated inside-omni-everywhereness insight - is becoming <u>the</u> pertinent concept for the recognition of being in the emerging arts.

Salient to this consideration is what I take to be a significant development in the emerging arts. This late development is the blending of computational virtual space with ordinary viewable space and objects. Such a blending indicates the subsequent emergence of a new immersive topological cognitive-vision which I call "viractual space"; the space of connection betwixt the computed virtual and the uncomputed corporeal world which merge. With the increased augmentation of the self via micro-electronics feasible today, the real may co-exist with the virtual and the organic fuse with the computer-robotic. This space can be further inscribed as the "viractual span of liminality" - which according to the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (based on his anthropological studies of social rites of passage) is the condition of being on a threshold between spaces. I wish to suggest that the term (concept) "viractual" (and "viractuality") may be a concordant conception helpful in defining this third fused inter-spatial place of the emerging arts which is forged from the meeting of the virtual and the actual.

But even more than viractuality, it is the principle of non-logocentric telematic immersion as applied to the emerging arts which interests me, as I find electronically fabricated worlds only superficially connected to technological means - and more properly concerned with ideals of self-transcendence.

Allow me now to tell you something of my Ph.D. dissertation called "Immersive Ideals / Critical Distances" which I earned at the Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts at the University of Wales in Newport, Wales. My research into Virtual Reality technology and its central property of immersion indicated that immersion in Virtual Reality electronic systems is a significant key to the understanding of contemporary culture as well as considerable aspects of previous culture as detected in the histories of philosophy and the visual arts.

The fundamental change in aesthetic perception engendered by immersion, a perception which is connected to the ideal of total-immersion in virtual space, identifies certain shifts in ontology which are relevant to a better understanding of the human being. This understanding was achieved through a broad inquiry into the histories of Virtual Reality, philosophy, and the visual arts and has led to the formulation of an aesthetic theory of immersive consciousness indicative of immersive culture.

A primary subject of the emerging arts is immersion then: an experience identified as the indispensable characteristic of Virtual Reality. The understanding of immersion to the emerging arts informs encounters and concepts of virtuality and hence "viractuality". To sufficiently address this subject in a scholarly fashion, I researched, found and accumulated aesthetic and philosophic examples of immersive tendencies, as found within the histories of art and philosophy, which subsequently contributed towards the articulation of what I have come to call "immersive consciousness". As a result of formulating such an immersive consciousness, a good deal of the basis for the questioning of the Western ontological tradition has been found in the Western tradition itself when we look with new eyes and ask new uncertain questions.

This emerging activity however is deeply rooted in the past. Indeed, my active presupposition for looking into immersion was that there have been manifested, during certain moments in time, ideas of immersion which approach what we know today as the virtual and the "viractual". These moments also are suggestive of disembodied experiences and expectations notable to virtuality, "viractuality", and particularly to Virtual Reality.

What I found was that immersive spherical thinking, as stimulated by the immersive spherical perspective, today opens up a territory of signification and possibility for the creation of emergent hybrid and deterritorialized meanings. With immersion, meaning in art - and in life - advances by seeing more clearly the underlying assumptions of excess inherent in the immersive outlook, by facing up to the radical implications of those assumptions, and by purging the emerging arts from conventional ways of thinking.

The method used has been be to reflect on the insights Virtual Reality suggests to the traditional Western history of unified being (which indeed engenders extraordinarily deep conflicts) and this has entailed a review of past and present approaches towards ontology and an analysis of a variety of artistic maneuvers. I have synthesized these questions and examples of ontology into an interrelated theoretical model for immersive consciousness for the emerging arts by clarifying an underlying philosophy of immersive significance. I thus outlined an integrative immersive philosophy by tracing the immersive impetus through its various expressions so as to examine the immersive philosophy from all possible sides. Of principal interest has been the discussion of subject/object cognition.

To a large extent, this look at immersive consciousness in the emerging arts contains a theory of immersive reconciliation where once apparent conflicting ideas and intellectual positions are mitigated in interplay.

This self-connected strategic approach is based on the premise that behind all of the emerging arts today, either representational or abstract, is the hypothetical exploration of the introspective rhizomatizing world of the imagination under the influence of today's high-frequency electronic/computerized environment. Moreover, since it is difficult making sense of today's swirling phantasmagorical media society, the general proposition behind electronic-based art may best be to look for a paradoxical summation of this uncertainty by taking advantage of today's superficial image saturation; a saturation so dense that it fails to communicate anything particular at all upon which we can concur - except perhaps its overall, incomprehensible sense of ripe delirium as the reproduction system pulses with higher and higher, faster and faster flows of digital data to the point of near hysteria.

If accepted, this supposition for the emerging arts, it seems to me, plays into the history of abstract art which teaches us that art may refuse to recognize all thought as existing in the form of purposeful representation, and that by scanning the spread of representation art, thought may formulate an understanding of the laws that provide representation with its organizational basis. As a result, in my view, it is electronic-based art's onus to see what unconventional, paradoxical, summational sense - in terms of the rhizomatizing world of the imagination - it might make of all this data and code based on an appropriately decadent reading of our paradoxically material-based (yet electronically activated) social media environment.

Certainly the space of cultural has dramatically changed with the revolution in technology brought about by the rapid development of the networked computer. The Internet has created a new geography of relations that could only be imagined as little as twenty years ago. And of course, art cannot help being of its time and place, but the interesting question to ask about art that deliberately comments on its time through the use of the latest

technological innovations is what makes it more than mere commentary? What makes it art? As Goethe put it, "only the mediocre talent is always the captive of its time and must get its nourishment from the elements that time contains." The insistence that art reflect only the tangled realities of high-tech life is a temptation that most digital artists, in my view, should resist.

This pertains to the emerging arts in that encounters with immersive computer simulation, one may assume, might create an opportunity for personal transgression and for a vertiginous ecstasy of thought and hence excel the assumed determinism of the technological-based phenomenon inherent (supposedly) in our post-industrial information society.

Indeed, it seems to me that as human psychic energies are stifled and/or bypassed by certain controlling aspects of mass informational technology, such a hyper hybrid ecstatic phenomena will most likely increasingly break out in forms of what I call "spherical thinking" - an immersively dimensional thinking which may result in immersive art. Immersive art is art which attempts to include everything of perceptual worth within its domain ambient but coherently and accordantly in an overall enveloping totality that is concerted, continuous, and without overly evident frame or border).

Immersion's fundamentally spherical, all-over perspective of dynamic thresholds cast a fraction of art on its course since the Fin-de-Siècle. This marginal tendency has now amply flowered in the emerging arts as art practice began shifting VR away from its initial paean to illusionistic trompe l'oeil. Moreover, with this immersive vision there is a shift to a more conscious peripheral mode of perception which entails a deautomatization of the perceptual process (whereby more emphasis is placed on what is on the edges of sight and consciousness) thus presumably adjusting the immersant up to an expanded and fuller

consciousness. This emphasis on the peripheral utilizes the Deleuzian broad scan; Deleuze's non-linear dynamic conceptual displacement of a view along any axis or direction in favor of a sweeping processes in space/time. Hence immersive vision may acquire an increasingly computational-like encompassing range useful in expanding the customary field of view - which is 160° vertical by 180° horizontal - outward so as to increase situational awareness.

Similarly, expansive simulation technology (when used in the creation of electronic-based art) will promote an indispensable alienation from the socially constructed self-necessary for the outburst of such ecstatic experiences/acts. Inversely, electronic technology will enable the contemporary emerging artists to express ecstatic reactions in ways never before possible. Thus, this ecstatic counteraction might provide a phantasmal defiance aimed against the controlling world's blandness. This aesthetic philosophy might provide, then, a fundamental antithesis to the authoritarian, mechanical, simulated rigidities of the controlling technical world.

The emerging arts, when postulated from the previously described immersive slant, promote various theories of consciousness which themselves have been discussed as being emergent rather than representational. Indeed Sigmund Freud identified an artist as one who offers insights into an emergent consciousness as consciousness emerges from within the unconscious realm.

The terminology consciousness means verbatim with knowingness. But that is not all there is to it as applied to art, for consciousness in art seems to be ultimately like a web woven in the mind/body of various silken-strands spun forth from interlacing states of unconscious desire which semi-automatically control the paradigmatic creation and reception of art. This definition coincides with R. G. Collingwood's definition of consciousness, in paradigmatic art terms, as that which is a "kind of thought which stands closest to sensation

8

or mere feeling" as "transformed into imagination". Indeed unconscious desires shape the paradigms which contour intentional expressions in art through the subtle powers of sublimation when the sexual desires of the libido are turned into cultural ones via the mediation of the artist's ego. The question of how unconscious desires are manifest in conscious cultural production and interpretation will be one of the minor themes of the emerging arts. This is a non-problematic working assumption in that even those which maintain that art is fundamentally a materialistic, social, and conscious product acknowledge that the role and function of art is located in its power to transformtionally change consciousness.

Certainly it is true that hidden in us and in connected computer space there is something so large, so astounding, and so pregnant with the darkness of infinite space that it excites and frightens us and thus returns us to the experimental and to a state of stimulating desire and perceptual restlessness.

From my point of view, the emerging artists who are or will be working with the power of telematic/immersivity are embarking on a new vanguard phase of artistic awareness in which total immersive involvement is the primary characteristic. This means for art an emergent reconception within which philosophic problems of consciousness are foregrounded. This entails a rich and diverse practice - for indeed even now the concept of art itself is pantheoristic. But in my use of the term emerging art (based on my activities as an artist) I understand emerging art to be fundamentally an extravagant activity expressing in a symbolic language the desire for joy.

For me, philosophy is a method of understanding and technology a method of doing art. I should establish that the pantheoristic definition of emerging art which I am upholding here, and which I find requires reiteration as artists move increasingly from organic

materials to the use of electronic and synthetic ones, is basically that supplied by Susanne Langer in her book "Feeling and Form" where she determines that "art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling". Curiously, in answering the question of how art feels, Ms. Langer proposed that the symbolic space created in painting was not real but virtual.

For me, the emerging artist's work then is the electronically aided creation of unfamiliar emotive abstractions of enjoyment. The significant cognizant value of abstract artistic symbols is that they may confer flickering ideas which exceed the interpretant's former understandings with unaccustomed emotive possibilities and scintillating expressive values which may be characteristic of even deeper inner pathos and jubilant non-logocentric unfamiliarities. And this is as it should be, for the technique of art is to make our understanding of both perception and history at first unfamiliar, particularly when attempting to increase our comprehension of, and neurological feeling for, telematic/immersive data-space and its vast powers for handling complex and abstract information.

Thus the central issues of the emerging arts fall necessarily on and between ideas concerning consciousness, philosophy, telematic/immersive space, art, joy, sexuality, myth, cognition, information-technology and metaphysical states of placement and quintessence in the formation of a theory of immersive connectivity that, I believe, is important for artists and theorists today.